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THE CHAOS OF EMPIRE, THE PARANOIA OF EMPIRE

DOCUMENTATION COVID 19 CRISES, EMPIRE

Serge Quadrupani: The chaos of empire, the paranoia of empire

Notes on the Nature of the Present Crisis and How to Tackle It

No sooner had the Covid-alarm started to subside that the sirens of war sounded. We could interpret this coincidence as a deliberate sequence engineered by the World's Masters intended to establish their power a little further, or try to understand this succession as the manifestation

of a continuity, as the reappearance in another form of what directs the action of the leaders much more than they orient it: a convergence of crises behind which lies the crisis of the capitalist mode of production. Crisis of the biosphere, crisis of governance, crisis of scales of sovereignty: what links all these crises is perhaps a general crisis of the only real wealth, human relations.

The “health crisis” was perhaps first of all a crisis of meaning and sensitivity. It is not about psychology. Or in any case, the categories of psychology alone cannot account for the increasing difficulty that humans have to relate to each other to produce their own life.

That the return of war to Europe was decided by a man who gives a particularly impressive meaning to the notion of social distancing is surely not trivial. This wildly caricatural but voluntarily staged spectacle, of a lone leader talking to his subordinates lost at the end of an endless table, certainly says a lot about the psyche of the despot, his morbid fear of illness, his phobia of contact. It surely partly explains why he was able to shield himself to such an extent in a vision of the world so clearly out of step, not only from that of the West, but also from that of the majority of his fellow citizens. Because how many Russians really believe in his nonsense about Eurasia, the superiority of the Russian man, how many adhere to his taste for war? [1] Probably no more than the soviets, in the 1980s, believed in the always thunderous official “socialist” discourse. We have evoked the notion of Chinamerica to describe the civilisational continuity between the two superpowers which dominate the world, but we could also speak of Russamerica to designate the adherence of large sections of the Russian populations to an extractivist consumer society stimulated by a technoscience freely turning on itself.

The paradox of a dream illuminated by the light of a dying star: in Russia as elsewhere, among this middle class on which contemporary capitalism has staked everything (and which now takes, when it can, the train for Finland), one wants to be American. Or rather, one wants to be like the Americans presented themselves to the world before the American Dream entered into a crisis that could well be terminal, that is to say, one wants to be consumers of products and brands considered worldwide as desirable, with just, for each people, a few more national particularities (kebabs rather than hotdogs here, homophobia rather than gay pride there, but smart phones for everyone). That this dream has begun to blur under the blows of the insurgencies which since 2011 have demonstrated on what unbearable dominations it rests upon is part of the problem facing governments today, many of whom are now in search of an alternative mythology. For Putin, deeply allergic to the uprisings of peoples, behind which his imagination as a KGB-ist can only conceive of manoeuvres between competing secret services, the insurgencies have been so many reasons to consolidate his bubble-like reality. The loving eyes that Trump has for the little tsar, the admiration that so many European rulers and aspiring rulers have shown him for decades, say a lot about the loss of meaning (the “lack of vision” in their patois) of the political staff, and his own inability to get out of his isolated bubble, his bubbles. If the ideological hallucination in which Putin lives was able to take on such a consistency that he now bases it on the nuclear threat, it is no doubt also because in twenty years, something has happened, a movement of derealisation that has swept everyone away, including you and me. Putin’s

reactionary Great Russian ideology is contemporary with Trump's and QAnon's alternative truth, conspiracy fantasies about the Great Replacement or the 5G-vaccine. Both are the culmination of an evolution that began long before the "health crisis", but the latter has done a great deal to increase their significance. Beyond the classic syndrome of a dictator who, by dint of surrounding himself only with mediocrities and yes-men, loses contact with reality, what Putin's long tables show is the triumph of the capitalist individual of the digital age, connected to the whole world but alone in his bubble. The pathology inherent in this situation, something that we all know now all the better because it has been carried along by the management of the pandemic to an unprecedented level, both in its intensity, as in its universality, is paranoia.

While the gesture would not be lacking in megalomaniac madness, equal to a History which seems to have lost any direction, we will not pretend here to make a psychiatric diagnosis on a planetary scale. Let us confine ourselves to pointing out a few analogies to see what can be done with them. The neighbour that should be kept distant, the other perceived as a mortal danger from which we must urgently protect ourselves by multiplying measures of separation: what we have experienced for two years has only increased an already strong tendency within the digital society, with its separation of bodies and its hyper-connectivity to a mixture of reality and fiction in undecidable proportions. The pandemic and the internet have combined to mass-produce a personality type characterised by "a pervasive distrust, frequently associated with a hostile impersonal style, a hypersensitivity to criticism, rigid and maladaptive beliefs about the motivations of others", and "self-esteem" manifested "by feelings of pride and superiority with stubbornness and intolerance towards the opinion of others" [2]. As long as you have frequented radical circles a little, this will inevitably remind you of something ...

The critique of the old world cannot be built on the toxic affects it produces. Rejecting the paranoia that wells up in capitalist social relations must be the first step for anyone who wants to undo them. When one hates, wholesale and in detail, the universe of the war of all against all, when one takes up against it on the side of friendship and the richness of human relations which is called communism, it should be obvious: in a paranoid world, it is those that are paranoid who are wrong.

Some move along with critical weapons and intellectual baggage that fall on the side of conspiracy, while others push their rejection of the West to the point of falling into the pro-Putin camp. How many have you seen walk away from their friends? Friends, that is, in the sense of *To our friends* and those who are just friends?

But this crisis of friendship that we are experiencing is not only due to emotional abuses, it also stems from the difficulty of keeping a common language, of conceiving together what is happening to us. It is true that in their collision with an opaque and magmatic reality, our concepts have shown that they really need a revision.

Empire, and worse

Chinamerica being its most convincing contemporary incarnation, the notion of Empire put forward by Negri seemed useful to us to account for the unity of the world around capitalist

civilisation, characterised at the end of the 20th century by the displacement of the attributes of power from the national level to planetary entities. The war in Ukraine is an opportunity to see that this balance of the scales of power is constantly being readjusted.[3] As the best analysis from a Marxist framework that I have read puts it: "If, until recently, the old world order of the absolute leadership of the United States was already moribund, while a new order did not emerge, it now seems that something new must prevail. Of course, allegiances and affinities were already in place before: United States/Europe on one side and China/Russia on the other. However, a decision has now been made. We can no longer hesitate or seek compromise solutions. Consequently, the alignments will now assume the typical Carl Schmitt logic of friend versus foe, crystallising unambiguously. And if, as we have said, such a decision was already an open possibility from the cyclical and structural dynamics, the United States and Russia have deliberately played a stage game in recent months that has allowed them both to consolidate, with forceps, the new "cold war" under their leadership, at least on the military level." It will be added that, while Western leadership is unquestionably reasserting itself around the American pole, in the East, there is a good chance that the colonial expedition of Russia (according to the name of another Marxist group) will conclude with greater Russian dependence on Chinese purchases and the latter's expansion into Siberia: the strongman of eternal Russia, repeating the inaugural gesture of his reign accomplished 20 years ago at the expense of the Chechens, will go "kicking the Ukrainians into the toilet", but it will be, despite its mechanical execution, for the main benefit of Xi Jinping. In this framework of confrontation between the Blocs, where one is supposed to decide according to Schmittian logic, it is no coincidence that a relevant analysis of the intellectual misery of taking sides should come from a Uighur militant:

"I am sick of this West-centric racism that states there is only Western imperialism against which the Asian giants are fighting. Worse still is the claim that Putin's Russia became imperialist to counter Western imperialism. So for them, the countries colonised by Russia, by China, do not even exist, therefore they have no right to protect their territory and their sovereignty against their former executioners, former colonisers. It's racism! It is a defence of colonialism, of non-Western imperialism! Because, according to this ideology, Russia and China are not imperialists, worse, they are enemies of the West, so inevitably they are the victims. The former or current colonies of these non-Western imperialists are completely obliterated by these Western-centric ideologues. In their high-level analyses, Ukraine and its right to sovereignty does not exist, because Western imperialism represented by NATO has not kept its promise and now Russia is obliged to protect itself. Hey Ho! Ukraine does not belong to the West or Russia and the war is happening there!!! Ukraine has the right to decide for itself and to choose its allies itself; it is neither up to you, nor to Russia, nor to NATO to dictate to it. It's really sad, infuriating, because you bury us, you tell us to get lost, you condemn us to remain invisible, to remain colonised by non-Western imperialism. Some continue to do so out of ignorance, others out of anti-Western ideology. But whether it is done for one reason or another, it is all the same, it is a racist and pro-colonial ideology."

In the absence of an insurrection to which we could attempt to provide support, geopolitics is never more than the field of our impotence, condemned as we are to commentary. But

impotence is not limited to us, since in reality, the mastery of the world's masters is always more uncertain. The individual factor can, and Putin's case is an excellent example, play a role that the so-called laws of history had not foreseen. The complexity and the interdependence characteristic of the current stage of capitalism introduce into our present a new quantity of unknown futures, as shown by the rumour which circulated at one moment about a cloud of nuclear particles that was supposedly caused by the Russian attack on Chernobyl. If the story had been true, the east wind would have brought home a return to history that no one had expected. We are not immune to these kinds of surprises; more, everything suggests that their probability will increase over time, to the rhythm of the deluge of bombs. We live in a world where, despite all the conspiratorial fantasies, the control of events often eludes, and will elude more and more often, those who govern as well as the governed. The Empire of capital is not a unified pyramidal world; it is an increasingly unstable chaos.

Tone, tact

When a friend, translator and delicate poet, to whom I send a cry for help from a Ukrainian friend asking for medicine and tourniquets, replies: "I am not taking part in propaganda exercises". As he is on the same level as I the lack of knowledge of Ukraine, I see in this case a sign that the contemporary flow of more or less fake images and news has added itself to the old ideological shells to harden hearts. To return to the base of sensitivity on which we must build our critique of the world, the rejection of paranoia is not enough: it seems to me that a positive feeling such as solidarity for those who are attacked by powers should be a minimal reflex. As I wrote to another friend: "I stand in solidarity with peoples, with the Serbian people when they were under NATO bombs, with the Kurdish people under Turkish bombs, with the Syrian people under Assad's and Russian bombs, with Ukrainians under the Russian bombs, as I was for the Vietnamese and the Iraqis under US bombs (as for the French bombs of the colonial wars, I was too young). Today, I am in solidarity with those who are fleeing as well as those who are resisting, and I do not believe that it is by repeating over and over again that it is NATO's fault that I am going to demonstrate my solidarity with them. In reality, I can't do much to show my solidarity, but I prefer to avoid repeating the old anti-imperialist mantras which, if the Ukrainians heard them, would drive them either mad with anger or even more demoralised than they are. If that's all we have to say to them, then I'm sorry, and it is fortunate for them that we, Western revolutionaries, in this period, count for nothing."

It is a tropism that will have played tricks on many of us: the obsession with "What is to be done?" When the Event occurs, you should know very quickly what to think about it, and what to do to counter the Enemy. In reality, sometimes you have to know how to accept reality, that is to say that one doesn't count for anything, and then take the time to understand, to become something again. This is why we can find particularly unbearable the adoption-reflex, still too frequent in radical circles, of an arrogant posture which has already played too many tricks on us. The haughty tone, the taste for provocation and scandal, an old French tradition inherited from the surrealists and the situationists, of which the errors of a Debord sinking into conspiratorial idiocies about Italy in the 1970s should have definitively disgusted us. How many times yet will we

still see such things reappear? The uncertainty of the times will have brought me at least this, that I no longer support those (here the masculine undoubtedly prevails over the feminine) who are easily contemptuous. We must be economical with our contempt, reserve it for the real enemies who are the rulers, just as we must avoid looking at all costs for a form of distinction and opposition to the dominant ideology. Deconstructing it does not consist in saying the opposite of what it says. Are machinations the ultimate explanation for the pandemic and war? There are ways of approaching the real that it would be suicidal not to leave to the far right.

In reality, what we need today more than ever, including thinking about the ongoing war, is a sense of sensitive contact with beings, and it is also the intuition of points from which it is appropriate to grasp reality. In a nutshell, what we need is tact:

In the current period, tact should be considered the cardinal revolutionary virtue, and not abstract radicality—and by “tact” we mean the art of nurturing revolutionizing developments. (The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*)

It is inevitable: we will come back to this.

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[1] On Putin’s personality and his ideological bubble, see the interview with Michel Eltchaninoff, author of *Dans la tête de Vladimir Poutine* (Actes Sud, 2015) in *L’Obs*: <https://www.nouvelobs.com/war-in-ukraine/20220303.OBS55206/putin-believes-intimately-in-the-superiority-of-the-russian-man.html#>

[2] Patrick Le Bihan, Michel Benézech, “Personnalité paranoïaque”, in Julien Daniel Guelfi, Frédéric Rouillon, Luc Mallet, (under the direction of) *Manuel de Psychiatrie*, 4th edition, pp.393-394

[3] On this subject, read the analysis of *Temps Critiques*: <https://lundi.am/Un-reequilibrage-du-national-et-du-global-dans-le-jeu-des-puissances>

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